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ABSTRACT

The complex problems confronting English and foreign language departments involve, among other things, student enrollments, budgetary shortfalls, lessened job opportunities for graduates, increased cries for accountability, and external intrusions into intradepartmental business. One area over which we have considerable control in the preparation of students for suitable employment after graduation. In assessing the magnitude of this problem, three aspects must be considered: present prospects for students graduating now who face a very competitive job market, prospects for students now beginning college study who will graduate in 1979-1980, and long-range employment trends which are likely to obtain through the remainder of this century. (JM)

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Employment Prospects for English and Foreign Language Graduates

The problems confronting English and Foreign Language departments are myriad, but--to quote Dryden--they are "All, all of a piece throughout." There are complex interrelationships between stable or declining student enrollments, budgetary shortfalls, lessened job opportunities for graduates, increased cries for accountability, external intrusions into intradepartmental business, and a host of other problems which confront us. While I have neither the time nor the expertise to fully describe the minutiae of those intertwining threads, I nevertheless would like to suggest that the unraveling of one strand of warp or woof will severely weaken the fabric of the whole threatening cloth. Moreover, I believe that the one area in which we have the most control is that of preparing our students for suitable employment after graduation.

In order to best attack this problem we must first attempt to assess its magnitude. In one sense such an analysis is the coward's way out, for it is simpler to measure than to correct. I am, therefore, relieved that I need not posit possible answers; on the other hand, I do risk belaboring the obvious fact that Humanities graduates are having difficulties finding those jobs for which we think we have been preparing them. Before making any fuller commentary, I would first like to offer a brief series of random-order explanations and disclaimers:

1. National and international economic conditions undergo rather violent changes, some of which are of brief duration, and most of which are difficult to anticipate. As national economies improve, so may most graduates' job prospects: the tides of supply and demand are difficult to swim against. On the other hand, it is beginning to become

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evident that the job market of the future will favor applicants with fairly specialized skills. Indeed, already even within colleges of Liberal Arts, which will produce about 60% of all graduates in 1980 (versus 42% in 1960), it is the Humanities graduate who has the most difficulty in securing employment. Future opportunities may be even more limited.

2. One must keep in mind the distinction between being "unemployed" and being "underemployed," and in the latter case one must determine the type of job being referred to. Is it an "entry" position, in which one is learning the groundrules for a career, or is it a semi-permanent position that is not in the mainstream of career-developing promotions (a vocational dead-end street)? Additionally, we should also remember that many occupations which have traditionally been open to high school graduates have in more recent years been "up-graded" so as to require that applicants hold college degrees.
3. Departments of English and of Foreign Languages do not "train" their students for any specific job; nevertheless, we all realize that gainful employment is a necessary fact of life for most people. However, let none forget that approximately 1/3 of all graduates will make a radical career shift within ten years after graduation, so training for a specific lifetime job may well be counterptoductive.
4. We should be candid enough to recognize that, failing some sort of cataclysmic revolution, openings in our own profession--teaching, at any level--will become increasingly limited because of a shrinking clientele. The shock waves of the post-war baby boom have already passed.

5. Finally, it is my belief that our graduates' difficulties are principally in finding a job, not in achieving job satisfaction or in moving up career ladders.

I would like to divide the remainder of my remarks into three groups: (1) the present prospects for graduates; (2) the prospects for students now beginning college study and who will graduate in 1979-1980; (3) some long-range employment trends which are likely to obtain through the remainder of this century.

The students who graduate in the coming year will face a very competitive job market. The disastrous 45% decrease in the hiring of Humanities graduates in 1970-1971 (caused in large part by a policy change by the U.S. Civil Service Commission) has been exacerbated by the more widespread economic malaise of the last year: in November 1974 a nationwide poll of employers indicated an expected 4% decline in baccalaureate hirings for June 1975; by May the same survey sample indicated that an 18% downturn was more likely; by mid-summer the poll showed that hirings had actually declined by 24%. In such an economic state, employers tend to look for trained "specialists" who can fill immediate needs. English and Foreign Language graduates, lacking specific expertise but having virtues mainly applicable to longer-range employer plans, often get passed over in favor of graduates from more technical and vocationally-directed programs. In sum, Liberal Arts hirings have decreased markedly in the last five years, and English and Foreign Language graduates especially can expect placement problems next spring; in fact, twice as many of our graduates will be unemployed as those in vocationally-oriented majors. According to Federal

statistics, somewhere less than 1/3 of all hires are from Liberal Arts, while roughly 2/3 of all graduates are from Liberal Arts or Liberal Arts-related fields.

In this black prediction there is one ray of light. Despite their serious difficulties in securing employment immediately upon graduation, some small follow-up studies of Humanities graduates several years after graduation show the following more cheering results:

1. Their overall rate of genuine unemployment is below the national average and not any worse than the rate for their peers in other Liberal Arts disciplines.
2. About two thirds of them felt their job to have potential as the first step in an upwardly-mobile career path.
3. Of those who accepted a "last resort" position seemingly far removed from their collegiate major, about half were satisfied that their present job had potential for advancement.
4. Although a fifth of the respondents viewed their jobs as "stopgaps" taken to keep the wolf from the door, about half of them were in positions which required a college degree.

In an employer survey, more than 55% indicated that Humanists with co-op, business, or experiential work were prime candidates, although very few in number.) As a candid, albeit unpleasant, footnote I should add that an alarming number of the persons surveyed indicated that--despite their current job satisfaction--they would not enroll in Humanities programs if they had it to do over again, perhaps in part because of the 23% drop in real starting pay for male humanities graduates (1969-1975) or perhaps because only 50% felt their major to be directly useful in their jobs. In any event, I suggest that

we may well be educating a battalion of the disgruntled if we do not somehow change our graduates' prospects for securing work.

The Southern Region Education Board has been doing rather extensive research on job opportunities in the South expected for 1980. (Supply and Demand for College Graduates in the South, 1980 [Atlanta, Georgia: Southern Region Education Board, 1975.]) While their statistics include all graduates--baccalaureate through doctoral, and despite the fact that our graduates often find employment in a vast array of fields, there is much that we can learn from the SREB studies:

1. By 1980 there will likely be at least 20% more qualified teachers than jobs for them, with only rather "peculiar" specializations having demands at all.
2. Communications fields and Law, both of which have embraced many of our past graduates, will be glutted with at least 20% more candidates than openings.
3. There will likely be only one traditionally-relevant occupational opening for every six Foreign Language graduates, although prospects appear brighter if one includes such peripherally-related jobs as an Airline Steward or Stewardess, Bi-Lingual Secretary, or Foreign Salesperson.
4. Graduates of our English departments face an even bleaker future in 1980. The SREB study projects that there will be 12,000 graduates (excluding those with teacher certificates as non-college English teachers) grappling for less than a thousand traditionally-sought jobs, and the report concludes that "although graduates in the field of letters will continue to compete for openings across the range of

occupations, they will face competition from graduates with more specific skills relative to do the jobs to be filled. With the general oversupply of college graduates projected in this report for openings in the traditional professional-technical-managerial areas, graduates in the humanities will have difficulty in finding employment that they consider relevant to their educational preparation."

If these prognostications prove even nearly accurate, 1975's battalion of the disgruntled will have swelled to an army by 1980. If we are lucky. If we are less "fortunate," the ranks of our enrolled majors will become decimated because of fears and doom-filled job prospects, our faculty-to-student ratio will close and become less cost-effective, and we and our colleagues will join our students in a search for employment.

Longer-range employment predictions are not susceptible to valid statistical study. In place of gloomy predictions, therefore, I would like to close with some, more general, comments about what Career Planning and Placement specialists call "The World of Work":

1. The number of managerial and professional positions trebled between 1900 and 1970, and some studies indicate that that rate may double during the next twenty-five years. (College graduates, by the way, increased 12-fold in that time span, and will treble between 1960 and 1980.) If we equip our graduates with some practical but non-specialized skills, they will stand rather good chances of securing some of these managerial/professional jobs; if we do not, then our graduates may well be worse-off than they are in 1975. Paradoxically, other studies

predict a slow-down in these career areas. That eventuality, would, of course, make job competition even keener, with generalists at a very distinct disadvantage.

2. Competition formerly expended on getting into college has been defused by open admissions policies, but job-getting competition will continue to intensify. We should be mindful that the primary function of education is to prepare citizens for what Frank Newman (President of the University of Rhode Island) calls a "free and useful role in society," and we should not permit "free" to assume prominence over "useful"; the two are mutually supportive.
3. Many career choices are invisible to us and to our students, either (1) because such career fields are foreign to our Liberal Arts environment or (2)--and this next factor's importance will dramatically increase in the next twenty-five years as technology expands its borders--because the career simply has not yet been invented. To address this situation, we should liberalize our curricular requirements so as to build increased flexibility into our graduates, and we should emphasize direct training that builds a capacity for the self-evaluation and self-directedness that will allow graduates to move into newly-wrought occupations.
4. We should not give up or retreat from our position that study in the Humanities provides a fundamental background for all careers. To bolster this position, there have been ten- and fifteen-year nationwide studies in which respondents who progressed upward in various careers indicated a strong incremental appreciation for the value of our "core" courses. A preponderance of career-successful English graduates felt their major to be extremely useful to their career, despite the fact that it had little direct job-relatedness.

As teachers of English and Foreign Languages we should beware of over-vocationalism and we should never suggest that we are merely purveyors of mundane specialized skills; rather, we should devise appropriate mechanisms that will aid our graduates in securing meaningful entry-level employment, with the expectation that if we have done our job as educators, then our students will perform their jobs, advance in their careers, and be the "free and useful" citizens we all strive to be.